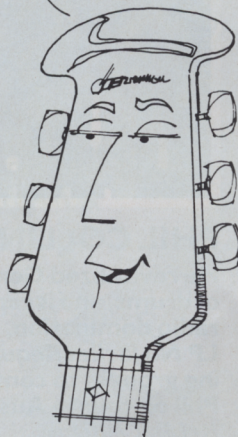


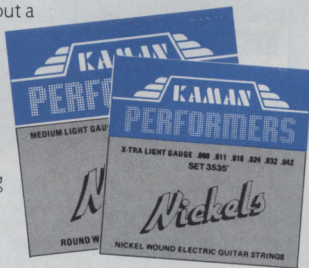
KAMAN Talking PegHeads #7

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DAVID BYRNE'S *KNEE PLAYS*



Presentational Byrne: "The emotion comes from whatever resonances or personal meanings the listener puts into it."

MARK ROWLAND

MORE CURIOUS CONNECTIONS: NEW ORLEANS BRASS MEETS SPOKEN WORD

I like ordinary songs," David Byrne insists. "I like singing Hank Williams. I like a lot of old country songs—people like Ernest Tubbs and Tammy Wynette. There are lots of pop songs that I enjoy too, but I guess lately I've disallowed myself from doing that."

And how. The leader and creative force behind Talking Heads, the best American band of the last decade, is no more a regular Joe than he's a regular interviewee. In conversation Byrne almost never makes eye contact, gestures nervously and speaks very slowly with pauses of unpredictable length, as if he's receiving signals from another

planet. But his ideas, verbal and musical, are invariably well-organized and articulated, and peppered with surprise.

Back when Byrne was in high school, he sang in college coffee houses, accompanying himself on acoustic guitar. But instead of performing standard folk repertoire, Byrne's selections ranged from Chuck Berry to the Kinks. "I'd play what I thought were good rock songs," he recalls with a smile, "for an audience that had never heard any of them. They really seemed to like them too."

Since that time Byrne has merged African rhythms with American pop, synthesizers with choreographer Twyla Tharp, and starched shirts with CBGB. Best known for his work with Talking Heads, he's also found time for independent collaborations with Tharp, Brian Eno and most recently playwright Robert Wilson. And nearly every signpost along this remarkable musical journey has been marked by a penchant for weaving seemingly irreconcilable strains into a fresh design that confounds his audience's expectations.

Byrne's latest effort, *Music From The Knee Plays* (ECM), is predictably star-

ting. The LP's twelve selections—mostly music for an acoustic brass quintet, alternating with deadpan narratives—sounds a little like what Bach would have written if he'd lived in New Orleans. The *Knee Plays* are "joints" (hence the title) between larger scenes in Wilson's theatrical production the *Civil War's*. Byrne's musical approach remains as minimalist as Wilson's play is ambitious—perhaps so ambitious that it may never be seen in its entirety. But like *The Catherine Wheel*, Byrne's *Knee Plays* music is enjoyable and more than occasionally provocative on its own terms.

"I wanted to work on the *Knee Plays* because it was on a smaller scale than other sections of the play, so I thought it might have a better chance of touring and being seen by more people," Byrne candidly admits. "The nature of the music was also dictated by practical considerations. I wanted it to be live, so the instruments had to be set up and dismantled quickly. I ended up choosing brass, in part because I wanted it to be loud enough to cover the noise of any hammering or moving around of the

sets backstage."

At first Byrne was inclined to utilize sounds more suggestive of Japanese kabuki theater, which he says would have been in keeping with the play's overall aesthetic; but, being David Byrne, he ultimately opted to go "in an opposite direction."

"I'd heard the Dirty Dozen Brass Band in New Orleans, and I thought I'd combine music I'd written with their music for spiritual and gospel numbers. Our collaboration didn't work out that well, but they did prove to be my main inspiration."

Byrne eventually constructed his compositions by simulating individual horn parts through an Emulator,

sequencing them, and then hiring L.A. studio smoothies like Chuck Findley and Ernie Watts to flesh them out and "add warmth, the way real players do." But not too much: "The music is very 'presentational,'" Byrne explains in disquietingly neutral cadences, "in that there's not a lot of emotion put into it. Obviously it could be played more fluidly or jazzy, but in keeping with the play I thought they should be performed in a very 'flat' manner. The emotion comes from whatever resonances or personal meanings the listener puts into it."

Much the same can be said for the five tracks on which Byrne adds his voice to the elegant horn charts; these

cuts elevate the record from cleverly contrapuntal mood music (it is on ECM) to a quirkier, more challenging form. Ironically Byrne's spoken vignettes, their serio-comic tone reminiscent of Laurie Anderson, often create the kind of interlocking call-and-response with the horns one associates with a New Orleans jazz funeral. But their rigidly syncopated rhythms and Byrne's dry, "presentational" phrasing and timbre are rather more suggestive of Konstantin Chernenko's.

Yet the stilted formality seems to work. Or, as David puts it, "There's no telling the audience, 'This is what it *should* mean.' It's more like, 'Maybe you've never looked at this before, or thought about things in this particular way.'"

Probably not. On "Tree" and "Social Studies," for instance, Byrne contemplates the relationships between people and their clothes and food, at one point spinning a fantasy about living someone else's life through their groceries. "In The Future" calmly reels off a string of predictions that would shame Jeanne Dixon; a modulating brass fanfare provides soothing relief. The prophecies—by turns bizarre, funny and sinister—appear contradictory at first, but upon further contemplation fall into place like pieces in a jigsaw puzzle.

"When I was writing the words," Byrne explains, "I noticed at some point that I could see myself believing in any of (the predictions). I mean, I could easily believe in an atomic war, and if I *really* stretch my imagination I can believe that everyone will love one another. So I thought, well, there seem to be a lot of opposites here, let's play off that. In the play that scene has kind of an ominous air, so there is a serious edge. And yet it's still kind of silly."

"Making fun of the future," Byrne lets out a soft chortle. "It's a lot of fun. I can imagine kids doing it at parties."

Ten or even five years ago, there wasn't much room for "silly" or "fun" in Byrne's music. His persona onstage and off was too self-conscious and neurotically energetic for that. More recently, though, Byrne has taken a quantum leap toward a sound that's warmer, more relaxed, openly embracing—and a hell of a lot more danceable. In concert he's evolved into a natural, self-assured bandleader and star actor. If Byrne is still not as suave a Cary Grant, at least he's a lot less reminiscent of James Woods.

"I've come to accept the artifice of stage performance," he says. "When the band started I wanted to strip that away—and we pretty much did. I still feel that's valid, but there's another way of doing things—and one big advan-



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tage is simply that a (more stylized) production has larger impact."

Consequently he gravitated toward African music, which is at once ritualistic and emotionally raw. "I felt that, in an abstract musical way, it reaffirmed the idea of humanity and community in a way that was...fun to do. I'd been accustomed to thinking of spiritual things as very personal, and to a large extent they are. But I also discovered that it's possible to have a spiritual experience that's ecstatic, pleasurable, not just academic and dreary."

Ironically, Byrne declined an invitation to participate in USA for Africa's "We Are The World." "I do think it's a duty of people to realize they are part of the community and the rest of the world," he explains, "but by that I don't mean everybody give a dollar, which can be a way of letting experts take care of problems. I do think (USA for Africa) is very well-intentioned, and a fair amount of the money might go where it's intended. But there are very few organizations around like, say, Oxfam, that deal with the long-term causes and effects of disasters. Although a lot of famines are triggered by droughts, I think their root causes are more often human greed. And if that isn't recognized, a famine can occur again next year. So my politics tend to be more individually oriented; they encourage people to make up their own minds."

So, of course, does his music. Though a forthcoming Talking Heads album will once more feature honest-to-gosh songs, Byrne expects that the record will still leave itself open to various interpretations—and he openly welcomes the possibilities. "Sometimes someone will describe to me their perception of something that I wrote," he remarks, sounding like one of his *Knee Plays* vignettes. "And it's not at all what I thought it was. But often, after I hear it, I think they're right. I have to step back and go, yeahh...I guess so. I didn't see that at all." ☐

Byrning Down The House

Onstage **David Byrne** plays a Roland synthesizer guitar, although "I never use the synthesizer part." Then why play it? "I thought it was a pretty good guitar! And our sound engineer said he was getting a warmer sound than from my Strat, which I use in the studio." In concert he also uses a rack of pedal effects, including a Boss digital delay, compressor and "a distortion thing," and an Ibanez Auto filter. The whole band uses Roland Jazz Chorus amps.

For songwriting Byrne relies with increasing frequency on the Emulator, "to see how something will sound, before I end up using the real thing. But the Emulator can be great live." His home "studio" consists of a Tascam 4-track. His recent "big purchase" was an AMS digital reverb.